

Transgender Transformation at Hollywood Mental Health **By Kathleen Piché, L.C.S.W., Public Affairs Director**



Three and a half years ago, Chris Bridges, A.C.S.W., Psychiatric Social Worker, Hollywood Mental Health Center (HMHC), began working with Maria, a male to female transgender client from rural Mexico. Since childhood, Maria had suffered consistent abuses; she'd been raped and assaulted numerous times due to atypical sexual orientation and gender presentation. She'd fled to the U.S. approximately twenty-four years ago and was living here as an undocumented citizen. Maria was forced to work as a prostitute to pay the bills and became methamphetamine addicted, and later HIV positive. Eventually, she sought help at HMHC.

As part of her treatment regime at HMHC, Maria has been seen by Dr. Levin for medication evaluation and worked with Chris Bridges for therapy. Since then, Maria has eliminated all illicit drug use and stayed sober for approximately three years. Maria was able to stop prostituting about 18 months ago and is currently employed in a beauty salon; she is excited at being able to finally seek fully legitimate employment. Equally important, Maria has worked hard at learning to be a far more gracious and stable lady with improved judgment and better insight into her situation.

At Mr. Bridges' suggestion, Maria began the daunting task of attaining legal status in the USA approximately two years ago. At her lawyer's request, Mr. Bridges advocated for her with a compelling written narrative describing the very real dangers awaiting the client if she ever returned to Mexico as a transgender and HIV positive individual. Maria's legal counsel requested political asylum be granted by the

INS. (Political asylum had become much harder to substantiate at that time for transgender individuals and was usually denied).

A year ago, the judge that heard Maria's case was moved and provided a favorable response. Her immigration attorney handling the documentation process credited the treatment received at Hollywood Mental Health for much of the decision and said, "You had better thank that psychologist guy!"

After waiting for another full year to pass, the final judgment was handed down this past week. Maria's official "Green card" will arrive within three months. According to the client, even the immigration attorney was astonished by this expedient decision.

Meanwhile, Mr. Bridges has effectively treated the client for PTSD and has guided her into highly successful HIV medical care and social support networking. Maria's blood results are near perfect at this time and she's fully adherent to mental health and medical treatments; she remains fully off drugs.

Maria is now able to live in safety and with some measure of dignity; she is now able to become a truly productive resident in this country.

Chris Bridges reports to Jim Maloney, MH Clinical Supervisor at HMHC. Chris is one of the (3) psychotherapists specializing in HIV mental health services within LACDMH. The other two clinicians are Jim Yandell, LCSW, Harbor UCLA Medical Center, and Michelle Matthews, ACSW, Long Beach Mental Health Center. The overall HIV mental health program at LACDMH is coordinated by Ingrid Marchus, MFT, Office of the Medical Director.